

These ranch towns changed in the shortgrass country after the population balance tilted from agriculture to fossil fuel mining. Ranch work and ranch life made the people more "coyote" than rig floors and oil camps.

When we had to open seven gates to travel from the place on the Divide to Mertzon or Barnhart, schooling offered no choice but to find a widow or couple who lived in town and were broke enough or softhearted enough to pasture redheaded country boys or sunburned country girls for the year.

In those days, ranches raised ol' kids outlawed enough to run under the house or behind the barn when a stranger drove up or rode up horseback. Plenty of the ones who came into Mertzon in the fall ducked from their reflections the first time they passed a plate glass window downtown.

We idolized the boys (truants) way out west on the Pecos River able to skip school and hide in the wet Mexican camps for months on the river banks without being caught. After all, all that school stuff ended anyway once you were old enough to be a cowboy. And once World War II started and the draft began, it didn't take long to become old enough to be a cowboy around Mertzon with all the grown men gone overseas.

It was so primitive in the 30s when I started to school that Mr. Conger, who took class pictures all over the country, developed an eye defect that doctors claimed came from snapping photos so often at such savage, untamed subjects as whole classrooms that had never been exposed to a comb or hair pin.

The diagnosis might have been correct. One of the healers doctored on Frank Buck, the famed San Angelo African animal trainer, to correct a vision defect traced to seeing so many tigers jumping through hoops in blurred black and yellow stripes. Mr. Conger's subjects didn't have stripes, but they were wild and unruly as tigers.

The teachers, in fact, held such multitudes of layovers that Mr. Conger stayed uncertain which grade he was shooting, or if they were dogged from misfortune and had no one to tell them they had passed. Chances are, if any parents showed up, they'd have hidden under the hood with him to keep from being connected to their kid.

My situation was so different, so strained. Miss Greengoss in the sixth grade well into my fourth semester still called me a "she" to placate Mother. I am sure I told you Mother stayed out at St. John's Hospital for three and a half years after my birth, refusing to take a redheaded baby boy home, and pining for a little blonde girl baby.

In the days when all seven boys and one girl in our family passed through the system, many of the superintendents and principals became so eager for Mr. or Mrs. Noelke's field knowledge in handling broncos, especially the range variety, that they'd issued us pass keys to the main building. At the time we didn't notice, but we reached the office at the first ring of the telephone. I grew so accustomed to being called up to the office on disciplinary matters that I had a favorite chair to sit in and smoke.

Our influence stretched so far that one semester in the spring turmoil my wife or myself one signed the final report cards for the superintendent's three boys mixed in with our mob of eight. (Note: Years and years later, one of the superintendent's sons retired early to spend his huge fortune in Mexico. Impossible to say who signed whose cards with 11 cards in a pile. Wish I had written down his scores, if I had the honor.)

During the time school closed for Christmas this year, the streets and sidewalks emptied enough to walk around the area. To cross over the grounds where "Child Who Sits in the Sun," the mother, parked for private PTA appointments with the sons and teachers, then past the school board meeting house where I, the father, had to disqualify myself

on so many issues that they finally elected me president and restricted my vote to special tiebreakers.

It came back how many a night, actually a morning, the board adjourned, worn out by trying to fit state rules from the Capitol to a small country school. Some good folks served on those boards for no pay and no thanks.

On one occasion by the school, an adult spoke on my walks, but didn't call my name coming out the front doors. One of my sons claims he saw my name at an ex-student meeting on a brass plate on the cafeteria building. And, he agrees, he's sure lucky they didn't put his record in brass, or for that matter, soft clay.